Unit .25

Session .03

Jesus Teaches Difficult Truths

Scripture

John 6:52-69

52 At that, the Jews argued among themselves, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" **53** So Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life in yourselves. **54** The one who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day, **55** because my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. **56** The one who eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. **57** Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. **58** This is the bread that came down from heaven; it is not like the manna your ancestors ate—and they died. The one who eats this bread will live forever." **59** He said these things while teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum. **60** Therefore, when many of his disciples heard this, they said, "This teaching is hard. Who can accept it?" **61** Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were complaining about this, asked them, "Does this offend you? **62** Then what if you were to observe the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? **63** The Spirit is the one who gives life. The flesh doesn't help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life. **64** But there are some among you who don't believe." (For Jesus knew from the beginning those who did not believe and the one who would betray him.) **65** He said, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted to him by the Father." **66** From that moment many of his disciples turned back and no longer accompanied him. **67** So Jesus said to the Twelve, "You don't want to go away too, do you?" **68** Simon Peter answered, "Lord, to whom will we go? You have the words of eternal life. **69** We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

Intro Options

Main Point:
Jesus offers words of eternal life.

Option 1

Students should imagine they work for an "advice column" company. They can choose their medium: they might offer advice in a newspaper column, or they might respond with a YouTube video or other social media platform.

Whatever their chosen medium, a writer/caller/viewer has asked the following question: "I have some hard things I need to say to someone I care about. I'm not sure how they will receive it. What advice would you give on how I share my thoughts?"

Give them time to prepare their responses (they can write things; they can do a "talking head" video; they can do skits or drawings of "what to do" and "what not to do"). Then let them present them. Debrief what similarities you saw.

Tell them that in today's lesson, Jesus will have difficult things to say, but they are things we need to hear. One of the themes from the students' "advice columns" may have been that hard news comes across better when it's clear you care about the person. Jesus showed us He cares about us more than anyone, so whatever difficult things He has to tell us must be for our good. In the same way, however difficult Jesus' words might be, they are still what the world needs to hear, so we should share those words with others.

Option 2

Your students should imagine they work for the Ad Council. They are to create uplifting, family-friendly advertisements with the following slogan: "Sometimes hard news is actually good news."

They should come up with comic strips, web banners, billboards, short radio messages, or short commercials (skits) showing this truth. They might show a family moving to a new city because of a better job, or someone finding out that they're a match for a family member needing a bone marrow transplant and will now have to undergo the painful surgery. Or it could be something as simple as a girl agreeing to go to a dance with a guy if the guy will wear a particular outfit that he'd sooner not wear.

Let them prepare and show their ads. Take their ideas to discuss how in today's lesson, Jesus will share some hard words. However, like all Jesus' words, they are actually good words.

TEACHING PLAN

Read John 6:52-59.

"Drink my blood and eat my flesh" is a strange phrase to say! We should not assume from the metaphorical language that the offense was lessened. Why? Because most of Jesus' audience was Jewish, and because Jews knew that consuming blood, by God's own law, was forbidden. According to Leviticus 7, for instance, anyone who ate blood was to be cut off from the covenant people (v. 27). Now, of course this would have been offensive to those whose faith was in their rightful keeping of the covenantal restrictions.

Is Jesus commanding cannibalism? Of course not. Jesus was commending an act that results in dis-fellowship as a means of gaining life. What gives? In one sense, of course, Jesus was pointing to Himself as the fulfillment of this law and all the others. Just as the manna points to Christ as the Bread of Life, all the Old Testament rites and regulations involving blood point to Christ as the Lamb of God.

Jesus' reference to manna in John 6:58 was a reiteration of this point. The old is passing away; the new has come. In essence, Jesus was announcing that His presence and work was the culmination of Jewish religious hope. He was announcing that if anyone does not make that step of faith from the law to grace through Himself, they would choose to remain in the dark, choosing death. The manna and the old ritual laws were only signposts that pointed to a new reality that had arrived.

- **In what ways are you sometimes tempted to trust in your good efforts for assurance of salvation?**

Once we get through the top layers of offense in Christ's hard teaching, we get to the most offensive truth of all. Jesus' teaching strikes at the heart of every one of us, whether we are Jew or Gentile, religious or irreligious. While everything in the world and everything within us calls us to believe that "we have what it takes," Christ levels the ground at the foot of the cross. We have nothing but need. If you want salvation, you must have all of Jesus. And you must be "all in." You don't have what it takes. But He does.

- **Why do we find it so offensive to hear that we don't have what it takes to save ourselves?**

99 Essential Doctrines (p. 24, DDG)

God is Truthful

The Scriptures are clear that in God there is no falsehood (Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18). God represents things as they really are. Everything He says can be trusted because God guarantees the truth of everything He tells us. The call for humans to be honest and not to bear false witness is rooted in the utter truthfulness of our Creator. Telling the truth is one way we bear the image of God, whose Son is "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6).

COMMENTARY

Main Point:
Jesus offers words of eternal life.

John 6

52-59. "There has been much debate concerning the meaning of eating Christ's flesh and drinking His blood. Some have argued that these words are a reference to the Eucharist. However, nothing in the immediate context warrants this interpretation. Rather, eating Christ's flesh and drinking His blood are vivid metaphors describing the kind of relationship true believers must have with Christ. The necessity of food intake in the physical realm carries over as analogous to receiving Christ (i.e., partaking of His body in a figurative sense, in order to have spiritual life). Jesus' followers must be willing to identify with Him and assimilate His life within their own lives so that they will be willing to suffer and die with Him."[1]

That salvation is only possible through Jesus was one of the chief emphases of the Protestant Reformation, and for good reason. The religious empire of the day taught that justification for sinners came through Christ's work and our works together. The Reformers heard the words of the Bible and took them seriously, no matter how offensive they might be to our spiritual sensitivities or religious pride. Justification comes through faith alone in Christ alone.

This is summarized in the Reformation "sola" known as *solus Christus,* and it was as offensive to the religious establishment of Martin Luther's day as it was to the religious establishment in the day of Jesus. "My flesh is true food and my blood is true drink," Jesus said (6:55). Everything else is a pale imitation, and it won't save you.

Activity

Your students are going to make parallel posters with the caption: "Hard Words Yet Good Words." The posters should then have at least two pictures (or comic sequences). In the first picture, they should show a good person giving hard-but-good words to someone; it could be a coach telling a player to work harder on a certain set of muscles, or a band director taking a solo away from a performer until he improves.

In the second picture (or comic sequence), they should draw a parallel to their first picture, but this time it will feature Jesus as the good person and us as those receiving the hard words. For instance, just like the coach telling us to work a certain muscle group, Jesus might tell us to love our enemies. Then we obey Him, just like the athlete obeys the coach.

Give them time to make their parallel posters and then to share them. Remind them that the cross is the guarantee that Jesus is always working for our good and always wants what is best for us, no matter how hard His words might seem. Likewise, His words are what is best for others, however hard they might find them.

In Defense (p. 26, DDG)

"Even Jesus's disciples were offended by such talk. But Jesus explained that he was talking spiritually. Unaided by the Spirit, human reason cannot discern spiritual truth. The Jews wrongly believed study of Scripture (see 5:39) and doing "works of God" (see 6:27-29) were sufficient for spiritual understanding … Many of Jesus's disciples turned from him at this point, which is a watershed in John's Gospel. But Jesus was not surprised by the defection." [2]

TEACHING PLAN

Read John 6:60-65.

One of the major themes of John's Gospel is the work of the Holy Spirit in salvation. As Jesus conducted His earthly ministry of signs and wonders, He continually taught the priority of the Spirit's powerful presence in salvation. In John 3, Jesus tells Nicodemus about the necessity of being "born again" in order to enter the kingdom of God. This new birth, Jesus said, is the work of the Holy Spirit. Without the Spirit's working, we cannot gain eternal life.

The crowd needed ears that hear and eyes that see the glory of Jesus. They each needed a new heart. They needed ears and eyes and a heart that they didn't receive with natural birth. Thus, they needed a new birth. In John 3:27, Jesus said nobody can receive anything unless it is given by the Holy Spirit, and in John 3:34-36, Jesus connected belief in Himself with the working of the Spirit who was sent by the Father.

Whatever the circumstances surrounding your coming to faith in Jesus, it all began as a gift from God's Spirit revealing the truth to you, calling you to God, softening your heart, and planting in you love for and worship of Jesus.

- **If salvation is purely a gift of grace, how should this affect our treatment of those who don't know Jesus?**

Read John 6:66-69.

In John 6, Peter got the question right again. Pondering the prospect of leaving Jesus like all the rest, Peter said, "Where would we go?" Truly seeing Jesus means every other option has become no option at all. What Peter saw, you and I must see if we're to believe in the real Jesus. We cannot have Jesus *plus* anything. We cannot be saved by Jesus *plus* our good works. We cannot be saved by Jesus *plus* purity. We cannot be saved by Jesus *plus* a good reputation. We can only be saved by Christ alone. Only He has the words of life.

- **What in your life tempts you as a rival of Christ for your affections and attention?**
- **How would you reply if someone asked you why following Jesus is worth it, even if you lose everything else in this life as a result?**

This moment is reminiscent of another exchange Jesus had with His followers, another one in which Peter stepped up to answer. In Matthew 16:13-17, Jesus asked them, "Who do people say that I am?" Answers varied, much as they also do today with some people. None of them will do.

"Who do you say that I am?" Jesus asked. Peter replied, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (16:16). Jesus then told him this answer is blessed because this realization comes not from his own ideas or desires ("flesh and blood did not reveal this to you") but because it was revealed by the Father. (As we've seen previously, for anyone to know the truth, it must be revealed by God as a gift of grace.)

COMMENTARY

Main Point:
Jesus offers words of eternal life.

John 6

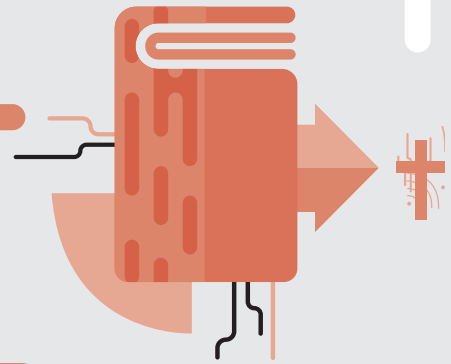
60-65. In the context of the whole of John 6, we see how integral the work of the Spirit is to Christ's teaching on belief in himself (see v. 63). To know Jesus is to hear the Holy Spirit, be wakened by the Holy Spirit, and respond to the Holy Spirit. The disciples ask, "How can anyone accept this teaching?" They were referring to Jesus' centering the universe on Himself. If you want eternal life, you must believe in Him. How can anyone get there? In verse 65, Jesus stated no one could come to Him unless the Father grants them the ability. This granting comes from the Holy Spirit, who convicts us of sin, points us to Jesus, and regenerates our hearts. Without new birth in the Spirit, there is no salvation.

Because the new birth comes from the Holy Spirit, we understand that salvation must begin with a work from God. The Protestant Reformation recovered this important biblical truth, that justification is by grace alone (*sola gratia*). Paul put the idea this way in Ephesians 2:8: "For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God's gift." Paul went on to say that this salvation is "not from works, so that no one can boast" (Eph. 2:9). This is the exact point Jesus made in John 6:63 when He said, "The flesh doesn't help at all."

66-69. "That the crowds were offended by Jesus' scandalous words is not surprising, and Jesus warned that there would be even greater grounds for offense in the coming days. Jesus didn't come to win a popularity contest but to give his life as 'a ransom for many' (Mark 10:45). The cross, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus are foolishness, even offensive to the natural mind (1 Cor. 1:18; Gal. 5:11). For the gospel reveals the depth of our need and our total inability to save ourselves. When we trust in our own cleverness or obedience or resources or abilities, we abhor God's grace. But when God kindly deconstructs our vaunted self-sufficiency, our hearts come alive again. The Father generously grants many to believe on Jesus (John 6:39-40), and the Spirit gives life to all who call on his name."[3]

(p. 25, DDG) Christ Connection

Jesus' teachings about eating His flesh and drinking His blood were difficult to understand. Many turned away from Jesus because of these words, but it is in them that we find eternal life made known to us in Jesus' death and resurrection.



JESUS TEACHES DIFFICULT TRUTHS

John 6:52–69

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LIFEWISE QUALITY

FORTITUDE – Trusting God to give me strength to face hard things.

HEAD

How did Jesus' followers respond when He taught things that were difficult to understand? How does Peter's response demonstrate fortitude?

What did Jesus really mean when He told His followers they must "eat His flesh" and "drink His blood" to live forever?

HEART

The world often assures us that we "have what it takes" to face hard things, but the message of the cross is that we will never be strong enough without Jesus' help. Think of a time you tried to handle a problem on your own, only to find that you needed help. What made you think you could do it on your own? Looking back, how might trusting in God to give you strength have changed how you handled the situation?

In the midst of confusion and difficulty, Peter showed great trust in God. He acknowledged Jesus as God—the way to eternal life—and chose to stay with Him. How might recognizing Jesus' power and choosing to believe Him give you strength to face hard things?

HANDS

Choose one of the following:

1. Following Jesus' words can be difficult, especially when we don't understand them or feel like doing what He says. Which of the verses below do you find most difficult to follow? What might happen if you actually did what Jesus said? Every day this week, pray and ask God to give you the strength to do what that verse says. Share what you experience or notice with a LifeWise teacher or another follower of Jesus.
    - James 1:2 – Consider it a great joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you experience various trials.
    - Matthew 6:25 – Therefore I tell you: Don't worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Isn't life more than food and the body more than clothing?
    - Matthew 6:33 – But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you.
    - Matthew 5:43–44 – You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

2. Psalm 73:26 says, "My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart, my portion forever." Think of an area where you tend to give up easily instead of showing fortitude, such as doing your homework, learning a new skill, beating a video game level or avoiding conflict with other people. Ask God to help you have the fortitude to keep going when you want to give up in that area, and commit to keep trying to do that hard thing, instead of giving up, every day this week.